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Masks and madness. Ritual expressions of the transition to adulthood among Miskitu adolescents*

The transition of persons from junior to more senior statuses has long constituted a important focus of anthropological inquiry, anthropologists mostly studying such changes in status through examinations of rites of passage (La Fontaine 1985). Because the transformations aimed at by these rites of passage are culturally sanctioned, they by and large do their work successfully, and so, provided initiands perform adequately, they may, thereafter, consider themselves suitably transformed. Anthropologists have theorised much less, however, about the attainment of majority status in contexts where the transition from junior to senior status is brought about by individual achievement and not by ritually sanctioned ascription. In contexts of this kind, juniors wishing to attain majority status have to undertake their own transformation, principally through demands for recognition.¹

Miskitu adolescents are one such group of people who have to undertake their own transitions to adulthood. Adolescent boys (*wahma*) and girls (*tiara*) are con-

* This article is based mainly upon materials collected during eighteen months residence in Nicaragua in 1992 and 1993, fifteen of which were spent in the village of Kakabila in the Pearl Lagoon basin. This work was conducted as a postgraduate student in the Anthropology Department of the London School of Economics, and as an associate researcher with CIDCA (el Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica). I am most grateful to both institutions for their considerable assistance. This work was also made possible by fieldwork grants from the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the Emslie Horniman Trust, and I would like to thank the trustees of both for their confidence in my ability to carry out this research. I also conducted shorter periods of fieldwork in the region, mostly spent in Kakabila, in 1997, 1998 and 1999–2000, courtesy of funds made available by the London School of Economics and the University of Manchester. I would also like to express my gratitude to Philip Dennis, Galio Gurdian and Eduardo Archetti for thoughtful and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. Remaining deficiencies are mine alone. Finally, I would like to thank Dr Marc Isler of Bluefields and the people of Kakabila and Raitipura – in particular Mr John and Miss Chavela Schwartz, their daughter and my comadre Lorna Schwartz, the late Mr Bernardino Schwartz Garth, Miss Rachel Schwartz MacPherson, Miss Buelah Theodore and Miss Gollita Theodore, all of Kakabila – for wonderful company and patient explanations.

¹ This process is well described by Collier and Rosaldo (1981) for young men implicated in the politics of brideservice.

sidered children (*tuktan*) by their parents and other adults (*almuk*), and remain so until by their own efforts they successfully induce, from the adults around them, reconceptualisations of their personhoods that allow them to present themselves as adults. This renegotiation of one's personhood is, however, fraught with difficulties. To meet these difficulties, Miskitu children and adolescents of both sexes have developed, or modified, a number of forms of ritualised behaviour to represent their concerns with this particular aspect of their lives. In this article, I wish to focus on two of these ritualised forms of behaviour: *mosko*, a masked dance which takes place in Kakabila, a Miskitu village in Nicaragua's Pearl Lagoon basin; and *grisi sikenis*, a form of contagious hysteria principally affecting female adolescents that is found in Miskitu communities more widely.

The Miskitu

The Miskitu today probably number around 100,000, most of whom inhabit the vast isolated area of eastern Central America located between Río Tinto in Honduras and Pearl Lagoon in Nicaragua. Most live in small nucleated villages located on the shores of the Caribbean and its hinterland of lagoons and small rivers. Others live in the villages stretched out in a line along the Nicaraguan bank of the Río Coco which today constitutes the border with Honduras. In the coastal villages farming and fishing are both important, but in riverine Miskitu villages farming alone provides the only steady form of subsistence, with the sale of rice offering some a meagre and unreliable income. The region's principal towns – Puerto Cabezas, Waspam and Puerto Lempira – have majority Miskitu populations, while to the south and west sizeable Miskitu minorities are found in Bluefields, Corn Island, El Bluff, Managua, Kukra Hill, and the mining towns of Bonanza, Rosita and Siuna.

The Miskitu were first reported in the accounts of late seventeenth-century English and French buccaneers as living in the Cape Gracias a Dios and Sandy Bay districts.² Around this time they began to attain prominence both as long range raiders for slaves and booty, and as middlemen in a regional trade, both with other Indian groups and Spanish settlers to the south and west, and with English and Anglo-Jamaican traders coming to the coast by sea. This trade crucially involved the exchange of locally produced goods for imports, including firearms. These allowed the Miskitu to extend their influence across much of the region. Later, during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, many Miskitus became workers in opportunist North American-run rubber, logging, banana and mining camp enterprises, during which time they learned to be occasional proletarians and came to experience in quick succession a series of localised booms and busts.³ Miskitu men thus learned to be flexible, willing both to move around in order to take advantage of short-term opportunities and learn the English language spoken by their trading partners and employers. Miskitu women, for their part, became accustomed to

2 See, for example, those found in Dampier (1927), Exquemelin (1969), M. W. (1732) and Raveneau de Lussan (1930).

3 See Roberts (1965), Floyd (1967), Helms (1971: 10–35; 1983), Dozier (1985), Olien (1988), Noveck (1988), Naylor (1989) for discussion of this history. De Kalb (1893), Vilas (1989) and Rivera and Vernooy (1991) contain materials on the 'company period' in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

doing without their menfolk for long periods and, as Helms (1970a; 1970b; 1976) suggests, matrilocality probably emerged as an adaptation to these circumstances.⁴

Over the course of this history the Miskitu have developed what Hale (1994) has termed an 'Anglo affinity', coming to regard British, English-speaking Caribbeans and North Americans as classificatory brothers-in-law (*waika*). At the same time they have tended to hold the 'Spaniards' (Spanish-speakers) to the west, historically strangers and enemies of their English-speaking allies, in deep distrust.⁵ This affinity with English-speakers was reinforced in the last years of the nineteenth century by the mass Miskitu conversion to Moravian Protestantism, brought to the region initially by German and later by North American missionaries, and, more recently in the 1980s, through the involvement of armed Miskitu insurgents with the United States-sponsored Contras (Bourgois 1986; Hale 1994). In the last three hundred years or so, the Miskitu have thus developed an acute awareness of the importance of the role played in social reproduction by powerful, mainly English-speaking foreigners, and this has produced, or enhanced, a valorisation of exogamous marriages between Miskitu women and potentially useful and predominantly English-speaking strangers (e.g. M. W. 1732: 302; Roberts 1965: 109–10; Exquemelin 1969: 219; Holm 1978: 82; Jamieson 1998).

This history, and the representations it has produced for the Miskitu, should be borne in mind as I come to consider *mosko* and *grisi siknis* as ritualised forms of behaviour associated with the individual's transition from childhood to adulthood. First, however, I wish to present, as I understand them, Miskitu ideas concerned with the distinction between *tuktan* and *almuk*, since the English language terms 'child' and 'adult', glosses as I am using them here, carry a considerable amount of baggage. I then wish to unpack this transition to adulthood in terms of culturally specific ideas about gender. This is because an understanding of Miskitu ideas about gender is crucially important in making sociological sense of this transformation. Finally, I also wish to explore the two gender identities termed in Miskitu *wahma* (male adolescent) and *tiara* (female adolescent), since it is usually individuals classified as *wahma* and *tiara*, occupying the liminal social space between *tutkan* and *almuk*, who turn out to be the principal actors in the Kakabila *mosko* and in *grisi siknis* attacks.

Tuktan and almuk

Although there are a number of rites of passage other than those surrounding birth and death, considered important by the Miskitu, these have little obvious effect on the immediate status of the individual. Baptism, confirmation and church weddings receive ceremonial attention and are certainly reckoned to be important, but none of these actually transform the status of the individual in terms of how he or she is treated by fellow villagers afterwards. Baptism, for example, is more concerned with the establishment of ritual relationships between godparents and godchildren and

4 In recent decades, the sale of marine resources (turtle, fish, shrimp and lobster) to wealthy Nicaraguan, Jamaican and Colombian buyers has offered the richest source of income, while the cultivation of sweet cassava and other cultigens provides, as it has always done, the basis of subsistence (Nietschmann 1973).

5 See Jamieson (1998) for discussion of the 'brother-in-law' relationship between the Miskitu and English-speakers.

between adults compadres than it is about changing the status of the initiand in a societal sense,⁶ while confirmation and the church wedding (the latter usually taking place long after the conjugal union is established) are essentially matters to do with the relationship between the initiand and God (*Dawan*). In terms of day-to-day social practice the differences between the unbaptised child and the baptised child, between the unconfirmed and the confirmed, and between the formally married and the unmarried, are nothing like as significant as those deemed to hold between children (*tuktan*) and adults (*upla almuk*), and between men (*waitna*) and women (*mairin*) (Jamieson 2000).⁷ In daily Miskitu life, it is these differences – between adults and children, and between women and men – which have salience as far as the treatment of the individual is concerned.

Miskitu people generally recognise that children, like adults, have intentions and desires. However these are considered subordinate to those of the adults around them. Children sometimes express their dissatisfaction by throwing tantrums or sulking but these demonstrations rarely have any effect other than to provoke anger or amusement.⁸ Adults do not ask children for their views when making decisions, and certainly do not feel that they are required to give reasons. Furthermore, adults rarely converse with children and the latter are frequently shooed away, usually (though not always) when the former are talking about important matters. Adults may on occasion accept a child's plea that he or she does not want to do something, but they will rarely ask the child for a reasoned argument why this is so. In other words, children may be seen and heard, but they are never listened to or consulted.

This subordination of children to adults, is strictly enforced, in part through the acquisition of norms which in Kakabila (the Miskitu village I know best),⁹ people call 'respect' (*rispik*) or 'manners' (*manars*), and in part by the legitimate use of physical coercion by parents. They learn, to a considerable extent through imitation of their peers, the proper ways to approach and greet adults respectfully, and, as they acquire 'sense' (*sins*), acquire a habitus which naturalises this self-subordination. They also learn that their subordination is enforced by the occasional application of parental beatings (*wipaia*).¹⁰ Miskitu children thus come to understand that village life is constituted by two worlds: the world of adults to which they have little direct access, and the world of children. Each is recognised as having its own distinct forms of sociality.¹¹

6 See also Helms (1971: 95–6) discussion of the *libra* relationship in Asang.

7 See also Helms (1971: 93–4).

8 Indeed, on occasion adults, grandparents in particular, sometimes amuse themselves by provoking these tantrums. One way that they do this with babies is to hold two up to one another and make them fight.

9 In Kakabila, Raitipura and some other Miskitu villages, Nicaraguan English as well as Miskitu is spoken. I have placed English words, as these are used in the region, in inverted commas. Miskitu words are given in italics.

10 The belt is the usual instrument for beatings, though occasionally the flat side of a machete against the calf is also used. In Kakabila these punishments are usually administered by mothers or fathers, though in some villages, for example Awastara (Reyes 1992: 10), it is the mother's brother, rather than the father, who has the right to beat the child. Parents are evidently more lenient in Asang (Helms 1971: 96–7) than they are both in Kakabila, where I conducted fieldwork, and in Awastara (Dennis 1981: 478).

11 In Kakabila this children's world includes a number of secret languages based on the syllabic manipulation of ordinary language words and collectively known as 'gibberish', which adults claim not to be able to understand.

Adulthood is widely believed to be attained when an individual can show that he or she has a spouse (*maia*) and offspring (*luhpia*) or, sometimes in the case of women, simply by having a child. Those who have these, it is said, consider themselves the equals of others with similar responsibilities.¹² Often enough, however, acceptance of these responsibilities is only truly demonstrated when a man and a woman own their own house. Although this does not in itself offer the individual adult status, the house itself confirms the individual's majority because it objectifies in visible form the conjugal and parental responsibilities theoretically given only with childbirth. Consequently, young men and women, having children but living in the house of one set of parents (usually the woman's parents), are rarely entirely comfortable with their adult status. The building of a house, however, makes manifest that the man in particular has what in Kakabila is called 'man's brains', that he is 'serious' about his spouse and children. House owners are therefore able to participate in village assemblies with confidence and demand shares in village-wide distributions.

One such village-wide distribution that takes place in Kakabila is that of manatee meat, an event which foregrounds the distinction between adults and children as clearly as any other. When Kakabila men catch a manatee, as they occasionally do in June, the head is first cut off and the body meat, sometimes as much as 150 kg, is divided between each conjugal partnership. Each of these, especially those with their own house, is entitled to demand an equal share. Children are given, on a first come first served basis, the intestines, a childish delicacy which they take home to be fried. Meat from the head, however, is distributed in a rather different fashion. To begin with, the head is given to an elderly man or woman to boil. Its meat is then distributed as cooked food and is eaten exclusively by those considered adults (*upla almuk*). Children are forbidden to eat this meat, since by doing so they would jeopardise the success of future manatee hunts.¹³

The differing forms of consumption of manatee meat foreground differences between adults and children. The body meat, eaten by all, is equitably distributed in raw form and is transformed into cooked food by each household, while intestines are thrown to children in an entirely random manner. Meat from the head, however, is served as cooked food only to adults. These distinctions foreground the 'truth' for Kakabila villagers that children are essentially undomesticated beings who are only socialised in the context of parental household authority. They are not deemed fit to participate in the important village-wide forms of sociality symbolised by the commensal eating of the manatee's head.

Wahma and tiara

As I have said, it is the fact of childbirth and the establishment of a conjugal union which turns children into adults in Miskitu communities. Theoretically there is a proper way for this to happen. Ideally, the suitor approaches his intended's parents and asks for a meeting with them. He then arrives with a crate of rum, possibly an engagement ring, and sometimes a 'pilot' or 'testigo', an older man who will speak on his behalf, thereby obviating any 'shame' (*swira*) he might experience with his future

12 The woman unable to have children (*biarapara*) is in a difficult position in this respect. See also Helms (1971: 101).

13 The hunt is a cooperative exercise, theoretically involving the village men (not boys).

mother-in-law (Jamieson 2000). If the girl's parents approve his courtship, the couple are then deemed to be betrothed and the suitor is given what in Kakabila is known as 'permission' or the 'privilege' to visit the daughter during the evening hours. A date is set for a wedding and assurances are made to the parents that the groom's house will be built next to theirs. During the courtship the suitor performs small acts of brideservice for his future parents-in-law such as chopping firewood.¹⁴

In practice, however, events rarely unfold in this way. Parental rejection of a daughter's suitor is always a distinct possibility, sometimes because they feel that she should continue going to school; sometimes because they feel that the boy in question is too young, too lazy or too immature;¹⁵ and sometimes because they feel that the man or boy in question is simply trying to 'fool up' (*trik munaia*) or 'take a little sneeze' with their daughter, an eventuality said in Kakabila to be all too common.

With parental disapproval and rejection of the boy's suit a distinct possibility, young couples frequently conduct their courtships entirely clandestinely, secrecy from adults being upheld with the tacit cooperation of the other village children who often act as carriers of love letters handwritten in English. Frequently, as Amanda told me, reminiscing on her own courtship, it is the boy's sister who acts as courier. This state of secrecy is often successfully maintained until the girl actually becomes pregnant, at which point she has to face her parents with a *fait accompli*, while he has to decide whether he is going to recognise the child as his. If relations between his parents and hers are good, he may well find that his own parents put considerable pressure on him to acknowledge his responsibilities, regardless of his own wishes. If he decides he does not wish to shoulder responsibility, and parental pressure has no effect on him, the girl is then placed in a difficult position. Unless she or, more likely, her parents arrange for a discreet infanticide (generally blamed on death in childbirth or *bibi kaubla*, a form of 'fresh cold' which often kills babies), an option which attracts unpleasant gossip, she will, in all likelihood, have to take responsibility without the 'real' father for what in Kakabila is known as an 'outside child'.

Alternatively, she may decide to elope, a big step since this is likely to be regarded as an serious act of disloyalty. Parents are generally particularly loathe to lose their daughters since the labour of the latter is useful, so much so that mothers who are 'rich' with daughters often lend them to favoured relatives. The theoretical advantage of having daughters in the first place is that, provided they marry properly, they will work with, and for, their mothers for the rest of their lives.¹⁶ Parents want sons-in-law (*dapna*) who are prepared to live uxorilocally, offer respect (*rispik*), show their daughters 'points' (useful general knowledge), and perform brideservice, and to this end they consider that they have the right to vet their daughters' suitors. Elopement deprives them of this privilege.

Elopement usually means that the girl goes to live in the house of the boy's parents or grandparents while the boy himself studiously avoids her parents, an arrangement which rarely works out well in the long term. Miskitu people often talk about

14 See Helms (1971: 85–7) for discussion of Miskitu courtship.

15 In former times, I was told, if a girl's father did not like a boy, he would humiliate him by saying to his wife (the girl's mother), 'Give this boy some *wabul* (banana porridge) and send him on his way'. In this way the girl's father, by refusing to address him directly and suggesting he eat children's food, would treat him like a child and thus reject his proposal.

16 With sons, eventually 'you lose the sweat (labour)', as one man explained it to me, because they go to work for their parents-in-law.

houses in terms of their membership of small house clusters,¹⁷ and in those villages where uxori-local postnuptial residence tends to be emphasised, these house clusters are usually imagined as being constituted by informal confederations of consanguinally related women who work together. Finding herself a stranger in a house cluster run by her mother-in-law and classificatory sisters-in-law, an eloping bride may well find herself cast as an enemy, and eventually return to her own parents seeking forgiveness and protection. If she is lucky her groom will follow and her parents will come to accept him, perhaps reluctantly, as a son-in-law.

The story of Becky and Bam Bam provides a fairly typical example of this. Bam Bam, considered one of the 'rudest' (badly behaved) boys in Kakabila, was the 'sweet-heart' of Becky, the eldest daughter of Sibella and George. Neither parent had approved of Bam Bam's courtship of Becky, and she eventually ran away to the other end of the village to live with him at his parent's house. Eventually she became pregnant and Bam Bam, aware that she was experiencing problems with his mother and his mother's sisters (several of whom were neighbours), built a ramshackle house close by so she might keep away from them. By the time Becky had given birth to a second baby, she had had enough of Bam Bam's family and, obtaining her mother's forgiveness, returned home. Later Bam Bam was permitted to join her in his in-laws' house, but he proved an unreliable son-in-law and Sibella eventually threw him out both for beating Becky and disrespectfully announcing that he would never build his house next to hers. Becky was sent away to a maternal aunt in Managua and only a year or two later was allowed to return to her parents, eventually moving into a house which Bam Bam had built, by way of contrition, next to theirs.

Because adults are well aware that many girls become pregnant against their parents' wishes, they generally keep their *tiara* (female adolescent) daughters as close to the house and yard as possible, especially after dark. If a *tiara* is allowed to go out strolling (*kirbi taukaia*) in parts of the village where she has few family members and 'bad boys' are known to loiter, she is usually expected both to take a chaperone (a reliable same-sex friend or sibling) and to exercise her capacity for 'shame' (*swira*), a speech style exhibiting avoidance of sexually explicit banter of the kind considered characteristic of 'courting' (*kut takaia*) (Jamieson 2000). Although many girls experience this surveillance as constraining, most are also glad of it, being well aware that in some Miskitu discourses the line between sexual consent and non-consent is anything but clearcut, a theme examined below for the phenomenon of *grisi siknis*.¹⁸ A *tiara* may also face unwelcome parental pressure to marry a particularly suitable, usually older, man. If, for example, a wealthy outsider (typically a middle-aged freightboat or fishboat owner) wishes to take a girl as his 'wife' (often one of several 'wives' dispersed in different villages¹⁹), her parents, aware of the possibility that he may offer them substantial help in lieu of brideservice, may well try and pressure her into going along with this, as Sibella and George unsuccessfully tried to do with their second daughter, Maisie, when an

17 Helms (1971: 54–5) considers similar clusters in the Río Coco village of Asang where they are known as *kiamp*.

18 The spectre of rape was particularly salient during the Contra War. Kakabila people blame some, though not all, Contra units for a number of rapes in the Pearl Lagoon basin. For accounts of army rapes during the same period, see Reyes (1993: 60).

19 See Roberts (1965: 109–10) for evidence of this type of polygyny from the early nineteenth century.

elderly European businessman based in Bluefields took an interest in her. If she refuses, they may even beat her, a course of action widely deemed entirely legitimate.

Miskitu *tiara* are thus faced with a number of dilemmas. On the one hand their parents expect them to be sexually continent and demonstrate 'shame' until a suitable groom is found. On the other, however, they are expected to use their sexual skills to secure husbands of whom their parents approve. Miskitu girls also know, however, that if they are to have any say at all regarding their conjugal futures, they must take matters into their own hands, and in Kakabila most do, taking lovers on their own initiative who, they hope, will eventually prove reliable husbands. In official discourses *wahma* and *tiara* become adults through the acceptance and recognition of parents and parents-in-law, the solicitation of 'permission', the employment of 'testigo' proxies, and appropriate demonstrations of 'shame'. Unofficially, however, both know that, unless they are lucky, they will probably have to manoeuvre themselves into the kinds of adulthood they desire by using clandestine sexual intercourse as their principle instrument. Used, however, to both parental surveillance and a habitus of 'shame', Miskitu *tiara* often find this daunting.

Mosko and grisi siknis

There are, among the Miskitu, rituals and forms of ritualised behaviour allowing participants to express desire for the resolution of these dilemmas. I now describe and analyse two of the most spectacular. This first is a masked dance performed in Kakabila known as *mosko*; the second is a contagious hysteria found throughout the Miskitu-speaking diaspora which periodically afflicts adolescent girls and young women, known as *grisi siknis* or fits.²⁰

Mosko

Mosko is a event in which takes place in Kakabila, more or less every year in January. Participants (or at least those who dance) disguise themselves with masks and

20 'Fits' is the term more commonly used in the bilingual English- and Miskitu-speaking communities of the Pearl Lagoon area. Although the great majority of instances of *grisi siknis* pertain to adolescent girls, it is also the case that other categories of person are known to have been afflicted. So, for example, Dennis (1981: 452; 1985: 293) reports five men in Awastara as having suffered attacks. Interestingly, four of these were considered by Awastara people to be homosexuals. *Grisi siknis* sometimes also appears to afflict those experiencing problems with affines for whom 'shame' is the prescribed mode of behaviour. I encountered one such case in Kakabila where an older woman experiencing problems with her son-in-law was afflicted. Dennis (1981: 482; 1985: 294) also reports attacks experienced in Krukira by both a man and his mother-in-law. Finally, it is also true that both religious converts, both in the past and the present, and people facing immediate economic uncertainty have experienced attacks (see Schneider 1998: 331; and Dennis 1981: 472). During 1997, I attended a workshop on health issues in Bluefields where it was reported that Miskitu male workers digging the important canal at Layasiksa suffered *grisi siknis* attacks while, during a recent visit to Kakabila in 1999 and 2000, I was told of a young adolescent girl who had 'got the spirit' during an assembly at the recently established evangelical Tabernacle church and become 'really crazy' ('*real grisi takan*'). These attacks on the economically insecure, the religiously ecstatic, and those burdened with troublesome affines indicate interestingly that *grisi siknis* or 'fits' is a mode of expression which allows a minority of its victims to express a rather wider range of concerns than those expressed by the majority of its victims who are the subject of this article.

ill-fitting clothing and move through the village as a group.²¹ It is reckoned a joyous occasion and is generally considered part of the seasonal festivities which follow Christmas.²² It generally begins with the news, spread by word of mouth, that a particular individual, usually a young unmarried man, wishes to organise a *mosko*. This news is usually accompanied by a provisional date and implies an invitation for those who wish to dance to present themselves to him secretly. Although anyone may offer themselves to the organiser as a dancer, and nobody is refused unless they are too young, it is by and large adolescents of both sexes who apply. The organiser also approaches those who might wish to provide musical accompaniment, in time assembling a group composed of one or two guitarists and a singer, as well as perhaps a harmonica player and a coconut-grater player to provide rhythm. Finally, a character referred to as the 'doctor' is also appointed.

On the day of the *mosko*, the participants make their way to the organiser's house (usually that of his parents). It is important that the dancers do so discreetly because their identities should not, ideally, be known to the rest of the village.²³ Inside the house the windows and door are shut, excited children shooed away, and the dancers, doctor and organiser prepare themselves. The organiser considers the route for the dance and tries as best he can to ensure the secrecy of the preparations, while the dancers, altogether around eight or ten, change into old clothes and boots. The hands of the dancers are covered in old socks while their heads and faces are disguised with headcloths and large cardboard masks, the latter featuring holes for the eyes and mouth and red marker-pen designs of no particular significance. The dancers also stuff rags into their clothes to disguise and render their body shapes comic. Each then is provided by the organiser (or perhaps an assistant) with a switch from a tree or bush. Like the musicians and the organiser, the doctor does not change his clothes or disguise his appearance but he does paint his face red and is issued with a water bottle (to revive flagging dancers) and, sometimes, a comic doctor's bag.²⁴ Outside the closed doors of the organiser's house the musicians tune up and decide on the calypsos and 'palo de mayos'²⁵ they will be playing. By this time hordes of children assemble in the yard and excitedly exchange news about who they believe is dancing, while those adults who happen to be sitting around complain that the dancers they believe they have already identified are too young to be performing *mosko*.

21 Superficially it is similar to the San Gerónimo masquerade in Bluefields, the Dixie Man dance found in Miskitu villages on the Río Coco (Helms 1971: 194–6), the *sikro* dances performed in earlier times (Irias 1853: 164; Collinson 1970: 151–2; Conzemius 1932: 161–4), and the masked dancing associated with the coronation of the Miskitu king found in Awastara and other villages north of Puerto Cabezas (Dennis 1982). Its most significant elements, however, are probably derived from the *wanáragawa* or John Canoe dance brought to the Pearl Lagoon basin in the late nineteenth century by immigrant Black Caribs (or Garífunas) from Honduras (Davidson 1980). See Young (1947), Conzemius (1928: 192–3) and Kerns 1983: 187–9) for description of *wanáragawa*.

22 I have witnessed *mosko* twice, first in 1993 and again in 2000.

23 Collinson (1870: 151), describing ceremonies which are probably *sikros*, writes that participants are 'decked out with feather and beads, and smeared over with paint, so as to become perfectly unrecognisable' (my emphasis).

24 Sometimes a 'doctor's wife' is also appointed, but I have not seen this.

25 'Palo de mayo' (literally 'maypole') is a calypso-like music style sung in English popular in the region.

Eventually the dancers emerge, switches in hand, and the children clambering around the house veranda and looking up from the yard begin to scream excitedly. A couple of the dancers may even lash out with their switches at any close by, an action which provokes even more screaming. The whole troupe, dancers, doctor and organiser, then join the musicians in the organiser's yard, and the latter strike up a calypso. The dancers gyrate and throw themselves around with rhythmic and comic effect, the comedy enhanced by their body shapes made ridiculous by the rags stuffed into their clothing; occasionally one or two peel off to chase children who get too close. Some dancers dance in pairs and simulate copulation, a cause for much merriment, while others (with lots of rags stuffed into the clothing in front of their stomachs) pretend from time to time that they are pregnant or giving birth, at which moments the red-faced doctor arrives on the scene in order to lend comic assistance. The adults watching laugh and warn both the dancer 'in labour' and the doctor that they are doing it wrong, and will consequently provoke miscarriage.

Having danced to one or two songs at the organiser's house, the troupe then walk on to the next house, the dancers once again chasing away excited children. The organiser approaches the owners of this next house and asks if they wish to buy a few dances at a fixed price per dance. The owner of the house may complain at the price but usually agrees to buy at least one and sometimes as many as five, and the musicians, dancers and doctor perform again. Adult members of the audience collude with the idea that the dancers are strangers, though in reality all the disguised children are well known to them, and they remark jokingly to one another that these *mosko* are so good that they must have come from Managua or even 'the States'. Once the troupe have satisfied the owner they move on to the next house, and thus continue until every house in the village (around 50 in the case of Kakabila) has been visited, a procedure which may take several hours.²⁶

Once the dancers have completed their tour of the village they return to the organiser's house and shut the doors and windows behind them in order to preserve their ritual secrecy in spite of the fact that their identities have generally been guessed some hours earlier. They take off their masks, change out of their grotesque clothing and, with musical accompaniment, perform one or two dances purely for themselves. The organiser counts the money and the troupe then make plans for a party in the village school or community building, to take place in a day or so's time. This money then buys both a chicken (to be cooked as a soup) and batteries for the party 'grabador' (radio cassette recorder). The party itself is typically an adolescent affair with an atmosphere considered extremely sexually charged.

Grisi siknis

I return to consider the significance of *mosko* further on. First, however, I wish to examine *grisi siknis*. *Grisi siknis* (crazy sickness), or 'fits' as it known in Kakabila and Raitipura, is a culture-bound syndrome that mostly, though not exclusively, afflicts adolescent Miskitu girls. It is comprehensively described in an interesting series of articles by anthropologist Philip Dennis (1981; 1985; 1999), all of which emphasise the psycho-sexual nature of this phenomenon within a culture in which hysteria is

26 Conzemius (1928: 192–3), describing *wanáragawa* among the Black Caribs of Honduras notes, notes that dancers go from house to house collecting money.

considered a normal means of expression.²⁷ In this article I draw on Dennis' findings, as well as my own from Kakabila and Raitipura, to reach conclusions which are different but, I believe, complementary to his.²⁸

Many Miskitu girls never suffer *grisi siknis* attacks while others, like some of the girls I knew in Kakabila, are affected very occasionally. Likewise in many villages attacks are rather sporadic. In Awastara, Dakura, Krukira, Raitipura and some other villages, however, *grisi siknis* has, during particular periods, assumed an epidemic character, spreading from girl to girl.²⁹ In these villages *grisi siknis* has proved to be contagious and attacks have afflicted the same victims night after night.³⁰

Grisi siknis attacks usually take place around sundown. Victims generally become hysterical, shout and scream obscenities and threats, tear their clothes off, and run out of the house towards the bush or sea. In the Raitipura attacks of 1992 and 1993, witnesses often described victims 'flying' (*palaia*) from a window rather than running out of the door,³¹ while in Awastara, Dennis (1981: 464) reports that victims often brandished machetes or broken bottles.³² Victims often appear to be completely oblivious to their surroundings and therefore, people say, they have to be captured and restrained for their own safety, sometimes with ropes. This job is generally performed by the young men of the village who generally regard *grisi siknis* attacks as a source of great excitement and amusement, though their participation is often a source of further anxiety for parents who fear that their daughters might be gang-raped in the bush (Dennis 1981: 453, 482; 1985: 293).

In the accounts discussed by Dennis for Awastara and neighbouring communities and in the 23 interviews conducted by Dr Isler and myself in Raitipura, most victims said that attacks generally followed giddiness (*bla*) and headaches. Victims then claim to experience hallucinations, seeing fierce animals sometimes and inevitably devils or 'satans' of various kinds who make them have sex. Often the perpetrator is described as an ugly, hairy, black demon of the kind known in Miskitu as *uhlak*, and typically this figure carries his victim away into the bush. Attacks of this kind are described as

27 As Dennis (1981: 475) notes, *grisi siknis* is by no means an exclusively recent phenomenon. See, for example, Bell (1862: 255) and Conzemius (1932: 123).

28 Dennis' *grisi siknis* material is certainly much more detailed than my own. My own ethnography is based on reports of a few isolated attacks in Kakabila and several interviews collected by Dr Marc Isler and myself in the Miskitu language with the victims and their families of the 'epidemics' which took place in neighbouring Raitipura in both 1992 and 1993. I should make it clear that I have not witnessed attacks first hand but have talked to Kakabila people at some length about such episodes and their aetiology. Barrett (1992: 28, 173, 210–11, 223–7) also contains some discussion of *grisi siknis*, including an account of an earlier epidemic in Raitipura.

29 Parents usually consult people knowledgeable about bush medicine and shamans (*sukias* or, in the Raitipura case, the Kakabila Prophet) in order to find cures. Typically, these individuals produce sweet-smelling medicines and also suggest that the victims are prohibited from smelling or eating counteragents (*waila*) which might provoke further attacks. In Raitipura in 1993 these counteragents typically included jack and tarpon because both kinds of fish, like victims during attacks, are notoriously hard to catch. See also Dennis (1981: 470).

30 Dennis (1985: 292) reports that in Awastara (pop. 664 at the time of his fieldwork) as many as 62 people were victims of *grisi siknis* attacks over the course of the previous twenty years.

31 See Dennis (1981: 479) for interesting discussion of the relationship between a number of forms of Miskitu hysteria and the verb *palaia*.

32 While the symptoms in different villages are very broadly the same, there are also variations between villages in the character of typical attacks.

being extremely frightening (Dennis 1981: 473). On other occasions, however, especially in the Dakura epidemic reported by Dennis (1981: 467), the perpetrator is described as a handsome white man or Spaniard who takes the victim to a big town to enjoy expensive food and drink. These attacks are sometimes described by victims in a more positive light.

Parents and sympathetic adults generally suspect molestation (though not possession) by *setan nani* (satans) of one kind or another and consider their daughters to be blameless victims. These *setan nani* are sometimes said to be *liwa* (water demons) or *swinta* (a bush demon) in Awastara and other northern Miskitu villages (Dennis 1981: 471), though in Kakabila and Raitipura in the Pearl Lagoon basin, it is usually *prahaku*, a sky spirit of considerable power and malevolence, who is held responsible (see also Barrett 1992: 225). Other witnesses, however, are more cynical. Dennis (1981: 453) reports, for example, that the Awastara school teacher ‘argued that *grisi siknis* was simply an excuse for girls to sleep with men’, those men presumably sent to catch them. Likewise, in Kakabila cynics told me that girls experiencing ‘fits’ are simply ‘lovestroke’ (love-struck).

Dennis (1981: 479) argues that *grisi siknis* attacks are responses to stresses such as ‘emotional upset, worry, fear and general anxiety’. These stresses, he argues (and I endorse this view), are brought about by tensions between the desire for excitement in metropolitan settings, parental constraints on the expression of *tiara* sexuality organised through the politics of ‘shame’ (see also Jamieson 2000), and, I would add, a widely held belief that men are intrinsically bad.³³ He also maintains, significantly for the purposes of this article, that the fact that Miskitu girls know that they must use their charms and sexual skills to attract their future spouses, is likely to be a key factor (Dennis 1981: 480).³⁴ In my view, the symptoms and aetiology of *grisi siknis* are apparently expressions of the anxieties experienced by *tiara* faced with an imminent, possibly welcome, possibly unwelcome, transition to adulthood, described in terms of a culture-specific constellation of representations and beliefs associated with the notion that sexual intercourse is a transformative device with the potential to turn girls into women.

Conclusion

Parents, particularly those described in Kakabila as ‘jealous’, recognise the transformative power of unlicensed sexual intercourse and therefore try as far as possible to keep their daughters under surveillance, both physically (making sure they wander no further than the yard) and through discourse regimes organised around ‘shame’ (Jamieson 2000). Unsuitable suitors thought to be laying siege to their daughters are thus kept at bay or ‘run’ (chased away), practices which for many girls induce a sense of imprisonment. In Kakabila there is a humorous *kisi* (folktale) which nicely captures this sense of siege and imprisonment.

In this story Jack (the Kakabila trickster) arrives at a town and obtains some menial work for the king. The king has a beautiful daughter but she is kept locked up

33 Kakabila people, speaking of male sexual appetities, often remark that ‘*waitna ba setan*’ (man is the devil).

34 To this end there is, in many Miskitu villages, a trade in ‘love medicine’. See also Helms (1971: 86) for Asang, and Conzemius (1928: 201) for the Black Caribs of Honduras.

in a high tower. The daughter sees Jack, likes him and ‘makes plenty sign’ (secretly signals to him). She eventually lets down her hair from a high window and Jack climbs up it. They have sexual intercourse and she becomes pregnant. The king, eventually aware of his daughter’s pregnancy, asks her what happened and she tells him. He then confronts Jack and demands an explanation. Jack is defiant, however, and he tells the king that he only took the job on in the first place because he wanted his daughter. The King is annoyed but knows that there is nothing he can really do now, other than demand that Jack marry her. Jack agrees, and within a day or so the king discovers that Jack has built a house of gold next to his (matrilocally, according to usual Miskitu practice and the king’s delight). Everyone is now happy.³⁵

This story, I suggest, nicely lays bare the ‘truth’ that it is the consequences of sexual intercourse in the final analysis, and not the intentions of parents, which transform girls into wives and therefore adults.

Mosko, as it is practiced in Kakabila, and *grisi siknis* attacks of the type described above are both, I believe, expressions of anxiety and desire surrounding the transition to adulthood. *Mosko* in Kakabila represents this transition in a ‘legitimate’ and idealised form. Strangers, or those who have previously been invisible because they were children, arrive at village houses offering to contract relationships with adults through the sale of dances.³⁶ These dancers may on occasion simulate both acts of sexual intercourse and childbirth, possibly hinting at an alternative and less palatable route to adulthood, but these acts are rendered safe by being lampooned. In any case *mosko* is less a ritual expression about the soliciting of parental permission for courtships than a more generalised desire to engage with adults as equals.³⁷ *Grisi siknis*, however, lays bare for all to see the ‘truth’ that, when all is said and done, it is a potentially perilous activity, illicit sexual intercourse with boys or men, which turns girls into women. Miskitu *tiara* are normatively constrained from making this point, from both personal and general perspectives, through their inculcations of regimes of ‘shame’ (*swira*). Attacks by ‘satans’, however, allow them both to make this point and, furthermore, to present themselves as victims rather than the perpetrators of sexual activity in the dramas of molestation in which this point is encoded.

Comparison of the details of *mosko*, as it is performed in Kakabila, with the aetiology of *grisi siknis* attacks reveals some interesting contrasts. For example, *mosko* dancers cover themselves up completely, concealing faces and identities and thereby making themselves the idealised high-status strangers with whom, as I noted above, the Miskitu have historically contracted relations. *Grisi siknis* victims, on the other

35 This story may well be a Miskitu-ized version of the Rapunzel fairy story, told by the Brothers Grimm (Grimm and Grimm 1993: 74–8).

36 The music for these dances, calypso and ‘palo de mayo’, is preferred, along with country and western, by older adults. Children and younger adults generally favour reggae (‘rasta music’) and soca.

37 *Mosko*, I should add, is also performed in January in neighbouring Creole villages, notably Pearl Lagoon, the district’s administrative and economic capital 7 miles away. Interestingly, it is Kakabila adults rather than children who usually go there to take part. Almost always it is poorer adults who go to Pearl Lagoon to perform, suggesting to me that, while in intra-village contexts Kakabila adolescents use *mosko* as a means of expressing the desire for majority status in the manner described above, in other contexts Kakabila people from an ‘Indian’ village which is both economically dependent on Pearl Lagoon and rather low in status (Jamieson 1998), may understand the performance of *mosko* as a means of expressing the desire for engagement with the town’s high status Creoles.

hand, tear their clothes off and become oblivious to those around them, onlookers being rendered invisible.³⁸ In this nightmare spirit world victims become disengaged from the 'real' world of family members and fellow villagers, the perspectives of the latter being invisible and therefore irrelevant. Thus while the audience view is foregrounded in *mosko*, it is the victim's perspective which receives particular attention during *grisi siknis* episodes.

As with *mosko* we find in *grisi siknis*, representations of mysterious strangers, some of kinds historically familiar to Miskitu, but in *grisi siknis* attacks strangers now appear, from the perspective of anxious girls, as dangerous sexual predators. Whereas the *mosko* dancers engage with adults for the first time, perhaps both as would-be village adults, but more significantly as the benevolent mysterious strangers represented by the masks which hide the identities of the wearers, girls afflicted by *grisi siknis* see themselves as victims of these mysterious strangers and they literally demonise them.³⁹ And, while *mosko* dancers use switches to chase away children as a sign of their eagerness to embrace relations with adults, it is the *grisi siknis* victims themselves who are pursued, certainly by the gangs of boys who deem it their duty to catch and restrain them, but more significantly by the 'satans' of various forms who beat and possess them sexually.⁴⁰

Real life situations experienced by *wahma* and *tiara* in Miskitu villages rarely come close to the ideal celebrated in *mosko*. Both know that if they wait for adults to legitimate their transition to adulthood (symbolically encoded in *mosko* through the buying of dances), they will either wait for ever or, in the case of many girls, be pressured into accepting men their parents consider suitable sons-in-law. Many adolescents therefore take the initiative and attempt to turn themselves into adults by producing offspring and conjugal partnerships of their own accord. However, this is a tricky business. Girls in particular are aware of a number of complicating factors: parental surveillance, their own *swira* (shame), unwelcome suitors foisted on them by parents, and the possibility that they are left with 'outside children' (unrecognised by their fathers). Girls also know that beyond the confines of the household and the conjugal union are murkier dangers linked to the expression of female sexuality which a habitus of 'shame' leave ill-defined. Miskitu girls also know that '*waitna ba setan*' (man is Satan), and that men are 'trickifying fellows' who seek women as 'pass times' for their own sexual gratification, often 'fooling them up' once they become pregnant. Unlike the essentially conservative antics of *mosko*, *grisi siknis* provides forums for the representation of these anxieties, as the 'shame' which one might think would prevent

38 The victims are only apparently aware of onlookers if they try to restrain them.

39 This is not to say that *mosko* and *grisi siknis* are imagined as opposites in any sense. Indeed Miskitu villages are probably more likely to have one or the other phenomenon, rather than both. Rather, both are ritualised forms of action which make use of similar symbolic devices from a wider, more generalised Miskitu inventory, to make sense of a shared set of concerns, specifically those relating to the transition from childhood (*tuktan*) to adulthood (*almuk*).

40 Dennis interestingly notes that the verb *taibi briaia* (literally 'to possess and press down on') is used to refer both to the act of tying up in the context of *grisi siknis* attacks and to generally controlling one's children. *Taibi briaia* means to restrict, or to have another person under one's control. Literally, it can refer to holding down and tying up a person having *grisi siknis* attacks. Less literally it can refer to the restriction implied in subordinate relationships – for example, '*children as restricted by their parents*' (Dennis 1985: 302; my emphasis). In Kakabila both *taibaia* and *briaia*, the constituent verbs of the serial verb construction *taibi briaia*, can be used transitively to mean 'have sex with'. *Briaia* (to possess) is a euphemism, while *taibaia* (to press down on) has a more graphic sense.

such demonstrations is obviated through the displacement of blame on to male demons.

As I noted above, the Miskitu lack institutionalised rituals which performatively effect the transformation of children into adults. There are no initiations into adulthood for boys or girls and so, consequently, the project of reinventing oneself as an adult is largely a matter for the individual. This project of reinvention, officially resting on the solicitation of parental permission and unofficially on the employment of one's sexuality, is a tricky business; however, mainly because parents, by keeping their daughters physically close at hand and by policing expressions of sexuality through the politics of 'shame' (*swira*), leave little space for overt adolescent manoeuvre. Little wonder then that adolescents, and adolescent girls in particular, have elaborated such spectacularly orchestrated expressions of the desires and fears surrounding this process.

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